

If you were raised in the 16th arrondissement in Paris, in an apartment by Jean-Michel Frank, it would be hard not to be inspired by such elegant modernist surroundings.

For Robert Couturier, that inspiration led to what has been a brilliant career as a New York-based designer, and if you look closely you will usually find a nod to Frank, especially in his grandest and most stylish projects. "As a child I always drew houses, pictures with windows open, showing furnished interiors," he explains, while sitting on a period sofa in his high-ceilinged Connecticut sitting room, which overlooks a picturesque lake. "And as soon as I could, I started at the École Nissim de Camondo, which offers a five-year course in design." (Other notable former students include Philippe Starck, architects Patrick Bouchain and Patrick Rubin and urban designer Jean-Michel Wilmotte.)

Robert Couturier's dining room in Connecticut. Photo by Tim Street-Porter





A giant *palapa* overlooking the Cuixmala estate in Mexico designed for Sir James Goldsmith. Photo by Tim Street-Porter

Couturier began his career in New York City, working with Adam Tihany (who is known for his large commercial projects and such restaurant designs as the many iterations of Le Cirque). A few years after becoming a partner and while still in his early thirties, Couturier opened his own office in 1987. And he started big: one of first North American projects was the 60,000-square-foot main house on Sir James Goldsmith's estate in Cuixmala, Mexico.

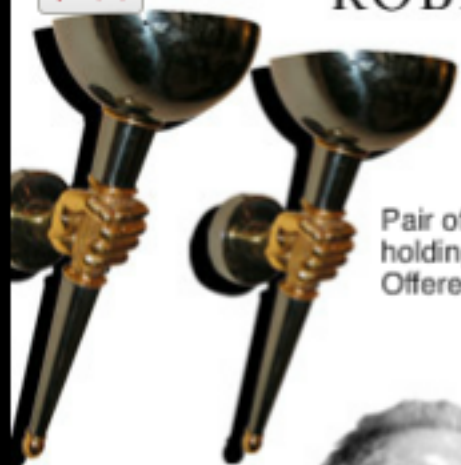
This Moorish fantasy sits on a bluff above the Pacific Ocean, with majestic arched fretwork windows and low built-in seating covered in exotic Indian textiles. Couturier designed a huge thatched open dining room, furnished with Indian bone-and-ebony dining chairs, which has expansive views over the 2,000 acre estate. "I was under exclusive contract to Sir James for nearly five years," explains Couturier, who also worked on Goldsmith's Manhattan townhouse, historic French chateau and private Boeing 757.

A Southampton living room
designed by Couturier. Photo
by Francis Smith

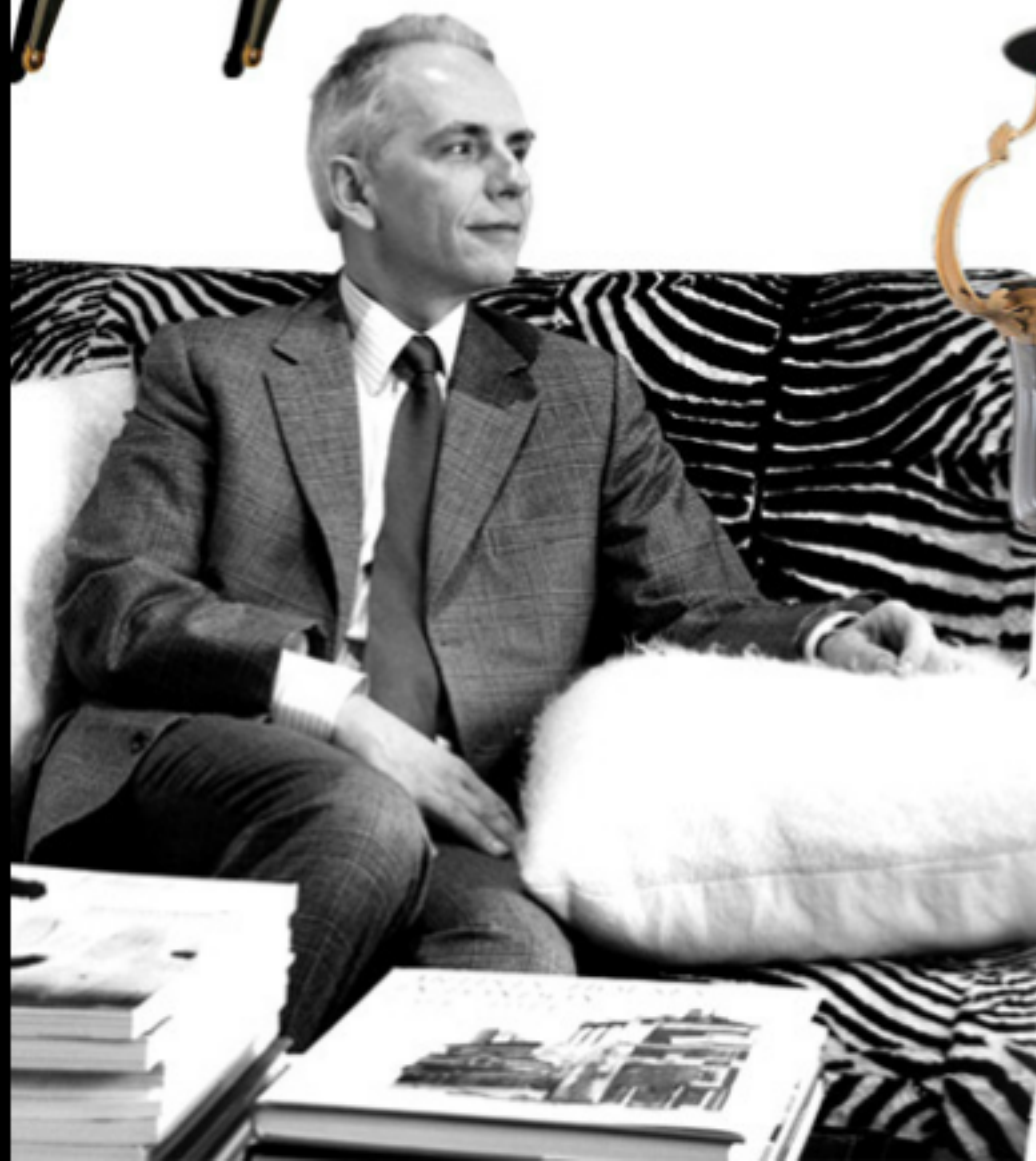


Quick Picks

FROM *1stdibs*.



Pair of 1940s hands holding torches. Offered by *1stdibs*PARIS



EF Caldwell lantern. USA, circa 1900. Offered by Chameleon Fine Lighting.



Archizoom "Safari" sofa. Italy, 1960s. *1stdibs*PARIS



Double pedestal desk by George Nakashima, 1960s. Offered by WYETH.



Michel Boyer "X" stools. France, 1968. Offered by Pavilion Antiques.



Pair of fossil-and-bronze lamps by Jean-Charles Moreux and Bolette Natanson, from Robert Massello Antiques.



ART OR DESIGN: I love ultra contemporary design such as the works of Ron Arad or Ingrid Donat, and yet I am most comfortable in great 18th-century furniture. As for art I am mad for portraits, mostly by the Old Masters. I guess I love formality.

MUSEUM: The Musée Nissim de Camondo in Paris.

BOOK: *Sodom and Gomorrah* and *Le Côté de Guermantes* both by Proust in *La Recherche*, however I don't like *Albertine Disparue* from *La Recherche*, so not the whole book.

RESTAURANT: La Grenouille in New York.

HOTEL: The Carlyle in NY, The Lancaster in Paris, and my most favorite of all: **The Grand Hotel du Palais in Biarritz.**

GIFT: For me, something beautiful or delicious like macarons from Ladurée in Paris or Calissons d'Aix – simply divine!

MUSIC: *Dido and Aeneas* by Purcell with Dame Janet Baker, as well as the last Beethoven piano sonatas by Peter Serkin, especially the Adagio Sostenuto of the 29th sonata – tremendous!!



WHERE WILL YOUR *Style Compass* LEAD US?

FASHION: I like very modern for women like Ralph Rucci and **Dior**; for me I like Savile Row where I have had my suits made all my life

FABRICS: I particularly like silk velvet and embroidered fabrics by **Lesage**, as well as very classic French 18th-century toile de Perse (not Toile de Jouy).

ENTERTAINING: I like somewhat formal dinners at home... I have a big problem entertaining differently. The thing is, I do not understand cooking and as I am most unfamiliar with kitchens. I always wind up breaking something...

COLOR: I have a particular penchant for greens and blues together, although our house is mostly green, gold and white. Oh well...

TRAVEL: I am much better traveling in my library; I love books, although there is nothing better than to see famous paintings in the flesh. I always have liked a particular **Chardin** and I was very surprised to realize how small it was when I saw it in St. Petersburg. I travel too much for work, so for pleasure I love to stay home... and yet I am most curious.

GARDENING OR FLORAL: I cannot recognize one tree essence from another; to me, it seems to be a lot of salads really. I like extremely organized gardens with lots of clipped edges and views through boxwoods, and yet I love wood paths where the sun dapples irregularly in the under growth. I am most inspired and physically content by the peace emanating from nature. I cannot stand winter – nor a drought.

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hen asked if he has plans for writing a decorating book or designing fabric lines, Couturier indicates that he would rather enjoy life than chase after the next big branding opportunity or marketing stratagem. "I don't really care," he explains. "I have friends, my curiosity, my appetite for life and a great sense of happiness. That's all that really matters."



A Paris living room decorated by Couturier.

Couturier is currently working on projects in New York, a large Lutyens house in England, an apartment in the 7th arrondissement in Paris, as well as houses in the Caribbean, Aspen and Cap Ferrat. What kind of house would he like to live in next? "A house by the sea," he says, after a little hesitation. "A house on a cliff, which I would do very modern – it would be nice to have a very classical house like this one and another incredibly modern." Indeed, despite a youth steeped in the aesthetic of Jean-Michel Frank, his favorite houses are not modern at all: Couturier cites the Palazzo Borghese in Rome and Carlos de Beistegui's Château de Groussay, not far from Paris, which he used to regularly visit when he was in France before it was sold and closed to the public.



The exterior of a Southampton house designed by Couturier. Photo by Francis Smith.



Couturier in his
Connecticut kitchen.
Photo by Tim
Street-Porter

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here does Couturier think decorating is headed when he imagines the future? "People with money live everywhere these days as there is one broad general culture – a big soup!" he says. Hence, he layers various cultural elements – stools from ancient Egypt below tapestries by Ferdinand Leger, seemingly thrown together with Louis XVI furniture – to create environments that are the antithesis of beautiful-but-boring hotel-room-like spaces. "You do feel comfortable in a hotel room, because that's what it is designed to make you feel," admits Couturier, whose interiors offer a great deal more than mere comfort. He does draw the line, however, recently turning down a rich Eastern-European client's request to recreate the interiors of Versailles for him. This very refined Frenchman still shudders at the thought of it.

Every weekend, Couturier heads north to his large neoclassical country house in Litchfield County, Connecticut. The house is a series of pavilions, sitting on 16 acres, complete with octagonal library and a classically laid-out garden. The slope behind the house is terraced with boxwood parterres, which give the garden a year-round structure. Here, the designer has a chance to enjoy life with his partner, architectural historian Jeffrey Morgan, and their three dogs, Hercule, Henriette and Bess. "I love decorating, but I *need* my house in the country," he confesses.

A Gerald Incandela portrait of Couturier hangs over the living room sofa by Adnet, which is flanked by a pair of 18th-century Chinese bookcases. Photo by Tim Street-Porter



Upstairs is Couturier's own personal office, which, with its Jacques Adnet furniture, Leger tapestries and large photograph of Couturier by Connecticut neighbor Gerald Incandela, is transformed at night into a glamorous living room.

Apart from that photograph and a pair of chrome armchairs from the 1970s, the room could easily be set in 1940s Paris, which is the essence of Couturier's style and which attracts a sophisticated clientele who are very often his very close friends. "I really work for people I have known all my life," Couturier explains. "They bring me in to create an integrated background for themselves, including their imagined past."

The entry to Couturier's country house in Connecticut, showing the new library. Photo by Tim Street-Porter.





A Fernand Leger tapestry on the Paulin Paris painted walls hangs in the apartment's central living room. Photo by Tim Street-Porter

The designer's post-Goldsmith career took shape in commissions from writer Andrew Solomon (for a New-York townhouse) banker Philippe de Nicolay (a London home), and the four cosmopolitan David Weill daughters, for whom he has done residences from Paris to Biarritz to 5th Avenue in New York.

Couturier's career may take him around the world, but he has always kept New York as his base. Today, Couturier lives and works in a two-story space in Soho. Downstairs, desks are piled high with fabric samples and rolled architectural drawings.